

Mixed Grill with Simon Imobo-Tswam

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It is not every time that that a young man disagrees with an elder. I do not think this is only in Nigeria or elsewhere in Africa; I believe it is a global norm. Normatively, when an elder speaks, it is case closed. But somehow, somewhat and sometimes, we find a young man, holding a contrary view from that of an elder. And when the elder, as in this case, is a retired general, former military Head of State, British-trained Ph.D holder, recipient of multiple honorific chieftaincy titles and veteran of boardroom politics, and the man disagreeing with him is no title-holder, it becomes a serious matter.

Well, I have chosen to disagree with the elder statesman and Nigeria's chief prayer mobiliser on one simple, but profound issue: his call in Benin, the Edo state capital, last weekend, that Nigerians should pray for their leaders.

Actually, Gowon had said something I did not agree with before, but since a young man should not be too forward in disagreeing with an elder, I held my peace. Recall that at one point, there was a coordinated rejection of the "Northerners" tag by the Middle Belt elite. Of course, the rejection of the tag has always been there, in fact, as long as the Geographical North has sought to foist it on that part of the Political North properly known as the Middle Belt. But the rejection was becoming more vociferous and very sustained, and the Geographic North was, apparently, alarmed at the political consequences of such a rejection.

So Gowon, whether prodded or independent-mindedly, spoke up; and in speaking, declared that he was a "Northerner." But his reason for being "a Northerner" was as strange as it was bizarre; if not altogether weird.

He had said he was "a Northerner" because the first pair of shoes he wore in his life was bought for him by the North. If being a Northerner were so simplistic as to be reduced to the buying or wearing of shoes, then it threw up some questions that I did not ask though. Were I to ask, I would ask the general: If the West or East (meaning Yoruba or Igbos) had bought him his first pair of shoes, would he have become a Westerner or Easterner? Or if those places are too far and, therefore, non-contiguous, if an Idoma man or an Alogo man had bought him the pair of shoes, would he have retained his roots? Or if a Tarok man or Berom man had bought him a second pair of shoes, would he have had a rethink about his Northernness? Or most critically, since being "a Northerner" is now a function of shoes, are not those of us who got our own pairs from our parents or bought them ourselves right in insisting that we are not Northerners, but Middle Belters? But as I said, I did not ask any of these questions, and even now, I am just mentioning them in passing.

But back to the present. In Benin-City, Gowon urged Nigerians to pray for their leaders. Now, this is a Biblical injunction, so why should anyone quarrel with it? But I am, and these are my reasons.

Prayers for Nigerian leaders: Humbly disagreeing with Gowon

Written by Administrator

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First, the Bible speaks of leaders, but we have cold-hearted rulers.

Between November 2009 to date ie approximately 12 calendar months, our “leaders” have depleted our foreign reserves by \$10 billion. I am not very good with figures, even less awesome ones, but if you carefully multiply \$1 by N150, you will get the exotic figure of N1.5 trillion. I tried to get the mathematical figure, so I could capture all the zeros, for effect, but my small calculator threatened to crash!

Now, that is a hefty sum by any standard, but where are we in terms of a better standard of living or health facilities or energy or education or gainful employment or ANYTHING? But let's go on.

Right now, there is a bazaar going on in the MDAs ie Ministries, Departments and Agencies, but you can include under the MDAs Federal Commissions, Authorities, Corporations etc. Everywhere, everybody is trying to retire (read evacuate) all funds so that they can celebrate Christmas in style and make a case for a bigger budget next year.

I am talking of bazaar, but have I mentioned the National Assembly? Please, forgive my oversight. Before now, the most lucrative places to work in were the oil industry and the telecom sector, but that is now old school: the best place is now Nigeria's National Assembly (N-ASS). Since May 2007 when Chief Olusegun Obasanjo left office, the greed in that corner of the Three Arms Zone has been feeding on itself and burgeoning; the reason being that there has not been an effective CEO at the Villa since then. And today, the greed has become a national shame. As the CBN Governor, Malam Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, revealed recently, no less than 25 per cent of the nation's recurrent expenditure is spent on 469 NASS members.

A text message, which made the rounds last week, informed Nigerians thus: “It costs the Nigerian tax-payer N290 million to maintain each member of the National Assembly. A working day earning of a Nigerian senator is more than the yearly income of a doctor; it is more than the salary of 42 generals or 48 professors or 70 commissioners of police; more than twice the pay of the US President or 9 times the salary of a US congressman!”

There may be hyperbole here, but if there is, it is borne out of frustration with the mindless or mind-boggling looting of the nation's resources.

But Aliyu Tilde, writing in his back-page column of Peoples Daily of Tuesday December 7, explained that although the bazaar at NASS is revolting, it is only has 3.4 percent or N158 billion of the national budget. Since nothing much is happening in the polity, we can assume that the executive arm is feasting feverishly too on the N4. 4trillion or 96.3 per cent of the national budget. This is why our “leaders” have bought choice properties in Europe and the Americas, and even our backyard countries of Ghana, Gambia and South Africa; and getting bored with the West, have now turned to exporting our Naira to the Oriental countries of China, India, United Arab Emirates (Dubai) etc.

There is more, in fact, much more to say about our “leaders,” but I believe this scratching on the surface is enough. So I ask the general: Sir, who needs prayers: the over-pampered leaders or the people they are impoverishing daily without care?

If we must pray at all to God, should we rather not pray against them, that the just Hand of divine justice will somehow descend on them, in vengeful fury?